

Confucius (Kong Fuzi), 551-479 BCE

Confucius was a sage, that is, a wise man. He was born in 551 BCE, during a period when China was divided into many small states, each with its own lord. This time is known as the “Warring States Period” because the different states were always fighting with each other. There were many attempts to overthrow the lords because they were often cruel to the people they ruled. It was a period of great chaos (disorder) and suffering among the people. Like other people during this difficult and dangerous time,

Confucius looked for ways to improve society and make it more peaceful. He believed that life would be better and safer if there was clear order, or harmony, in society. He also understood that rulers needed to govern more wisely to avoid or reduce bloodshed. Confucius believed that people should not use family connections to obtain government positions as many people did during that time. Instead, he thought that government officials should be well-educated, talented, honest, and fair. Confucius believed that government officials should live lives of virtue (be virtuous) so that the people they ruled would follow their example. Therefore, he developed a philosophy that established clear relationships between people in all aspects of their lives:

- 1. Parents-Children.** Parents should love and care for their children. Children should respect and obey their parents. The children’s respect and devotion for their parents is often called “filial piety.”
- 2. Ruler-Subjects.** A ruler should care for the people he governs. The people he rules (the subjects) should obey a ruler who takes care of them.
- 3. Older brothers-Younger brothers.** Older brothers should care for younger brothers. Younger brothers should respect and obey older brothers.
- 4. Husband-Wife.** Married people should live in harmony. A wife should obey her husband.
- 5. Friend-Friend.** Friends should trust each other and treat each other well.

Pattern: Those in power must take care of those who are weaker. Those who are weaker must respect and obey those who are in power. Those who are equal should treat each other equally. The primary and most important relationship is between parent and child. Children who understand their roles and duties to their parents will then be able to go into the world and understand their positions in society. It will be very difficult, however, for those who do not fulfill their primary duties (to their parents) to lead a successful life.

These relationships are based on traditional Chinese values, such as respect for elders (older people) and ancestor worship, which existed before the time of Confucius. This was an important reason why Chinese people were able to embrace the teachings of Confucius: they were already familiar with many of these ideas. The teachings of Confucius were rooted in things that the Chinese already believed in and practiced.

On the other hand, Confucianism also placed greater importance on learning, or scholarship. According to Confucianism, people can become government officials to help rule the land if they study hard, are just and fair, and can pass difficult exams. Under his philosophy, it is not as important which family you are born into. It is much more important how smart and just you are. Therefore, Confucianism gives everyone the opportunity to become more powerful.

The main writings of Confucius are in the Analects, the sayings of Confucius. In addition to his own words the ideas of Confucianism were developed by many other people who were the disciples of Confucius. These people accepted and spread his teachings. The most famous of these was Mencius. He was born almost 100 years after Confucius died. He tried to convince rulers in China that they should accept the teachings of Confucius.

In Confucianism, memorizing the sayings of Confucius was one of the most important rituals. That way, if someone spoke the first part of a saying of Confucius, the other people in the group (Confucians) would be able to complete it. If they could not, they would not be considered to be part of that group of “well-educated” people or “leaders.”

Some of the sayings of Confucius were about the five relationships, but many others were examples of the way people should behave in order to keep harmony in society. These sayings often talked about people who were superior (better than other people) or inferior (worse than other people).

Here are two examples of famous sayings of Confucius:

- What is a superior person? One who acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions”
- Good government results when those who are near are made happy, and those who are far are attracted to it.”
- Have no friends [that are not] not equal to yourself.
- The inferior man is disrespectful to great men; he makes fun of wisdom.
- While his parents are alive, a son may not move far away.
- Of all people, girls and servants are most difficult to behave.
- The progress of a superior person is upwards, the progress of an inferior person is downwards.



Statue of Confucius at the
Confucius Temple in Beijing China



Tomb of Confucius in Qufu China